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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: DRL/IRF VISIT ELICITS VARIOUS
PERSPECTIVES ON ANTI-CONVERSION LEGISLATION

REF: COLOMBO 1379

Classified By: James F. Entwistle, Deputy Chief of Mission. 1.4 (b,d)

11. (SBU) SUMMARY. In an October 7-8 visit, Joanela Morales, Foreign Affairs Officer in the Office of International Religious Freedom in the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (DRL/IRF), discussed religious freedom issues and possible anti-conversion legislation in Sri Lanka with representatives from various religious groups. Christian groups remain concerned about the anti-conversion legislation sponsored by Buddhist monk MPs, and are distressed by a spate of attacks on churches and Christian organizations earlier this year. Despite the August Supreme Court finding that key parts of the proposed legislation are unconstitutional, some Buddhist monk MPs from the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) are still considering proposing some form of legislation, either a revised version of the previous bill or reportedly even a possible amendment to the constitution. While some Hindu groups nominally support anti-conversion legislation, they lack sufficient political clout to make their voices heard. Although some Muslim leaders have expressed dismay about the anti-conversion legislation, Muslim groups have not taken a public stand on this issue. END SUMMARY.

Christian Point of View

12. (SBU) Joanela Morales of DRL/IRF visited Sri Lanka October 7-8 to meet with religious leaders and NGO activists to explore reactions to proposed anti-conversion legislation. Rohan Edrisinha, Director of the Center for Policy Alternatives (CPA) and an opponent of anti-conversion legislation, told Morales that the proposed legislation is driven by allegations that evangelical churches "unethically induce" poor people to convert to Christianity through offering gifts of money, clothing, or other items. (Note: CPA was one of several parties who presented petitions to the Supreme Court earlier this year against the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU)-sponsored religious anti-conversion legislation. End note.) While the conversion tactics some evangelical churches use are sometimes aggressive or insensitive, he said, freedom of speech should nonetheless be protected. Discussing the possibility of inter-religious councils to address the issue of unethical conversions, Edrisinha speculated that persuading "charismatic" evangelical churches accused of "unethical" conversions to participate could be difficult, given that over 100 of these churches are not affiliated with other churches or umbrella Christian groups.

13. (SBU) Edrisinha denied that persecution of Christians stopped after the August Supreme Court decision ruling portions of the JHU anti-conversion legislation unconstitutional (Reftel). Instead, he charged that some Buddhist monks and lay people continue to intimidate evangelical Christian groups and churches, although not on the same scale as during the first half of the year, when attacks on about 25 Christian churches and organizations occurred. He suggested that since the Supreme Court had ruled portions of the JHU anti-conversion legislation unconstitutional, the JHU now might try to change the Constitution itself. He referred to a possible JHU-sponsored 18th amendment to the Constitution, making Buddhism the state religion and requiring that Buddhists raise their children in the religion. Edrisinha asserted that the amendment has already been drafted but has not yet been tabled in Parliament.

14. (C) Christian interlocutors told Morales that they attribute the anti-conversion sentiment whipped up by the JHU to the all-too-human foible of scapegoating. According to Chrisso Handy, Pastor of the evangelical People's Church in Colombo, members of the majority community may feel insecure or unhappy for a number of reasons, such as the rising cost of living or fears that a political settlement to the ethnic conflict might undermine their status. People want someone to blame for all of this unwanted change, Handy reasoned, and Christian churches, especially small, independent ones, provide a convenient target. Buddhist Perspectives

15. (SBU) In an October 8 conversation with Morales, JHU Secretary and MP Ven. Uduwe Dhammaloka Thero stated that the

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JHU would be the first to condemn violence against any religion. All religions have equal status with Buddhism, he said; people working against other religions are not true Buddhists. That said, recent "unfortunate" actions by Christian NGOs have changed a situation in which hundreds of years of peaceful cohabitation with other religions was the norm, he charged. These NGOs seek out the poorest villages and offer material items and money to induce conversion, he claimed; some groups even distribute biscuits shaped like the Buddha in an effort to denigrate the religion. (Note: Christian leaders have told us they hear this allegation repeatedly as well and have asked those making these claims to substantiate them by providing samples of these biscuits. To date, according to Godfrey Yogarajah of the National Christian Evangelical Alliance, no one has been able to do so. End note.) Rather than promoting intolerance, the JHU brought the legislation to "bring harmony to the country," according to the Dhammaloka Thero, who said he was willing to discuss the issue with other religious leaders.

16. (SBU) Dhammaloka Thero admitted that the JHU might submit an amendment to the Constitution, but denied there was a draft in progress. Morales commented that if such an amendment were to be proposed, the USG would be concerned about the implications for religious freedom in Sri Lanka. In a separate conversation, Dr. Kollupitiye Mahinda Sangharakhita Thero, the Chief Monk of the Kelaniya Raja Maha Viharaya near Colombo, told Morales that he recognizes that the proposed legislation might not be the best means of halting induced conversions, but nonetheless supports the preventive effect he believes it might offer. He reiterated allegations of Christian attempts to discredit Buddhism, claiming that converts are asked to smash Buddha statues.

Nominal Hindu Support for Legislation

17. (SBU) S. Neelakandan, General Secretary of the All Ceylon Hindu Congress (ACHC), told Morales that his organization supports the anti-conversion legislation proposed by the JHU. Indeed, ACHC was involved in sponsoring an earlier anti-conversion bill in 2003, which was never tabled in Parliament, he reported. Neelakandan charged that because of the ethnic conflict, thousands of people became refugees and were thus more vulnerable to "enticements" by evangelical NGOs and churches from Japan, Canada and India working with refugee populations. Like Sangharakhita Thero of the Kelaniya Buddhist Temple, Neelakandan supports the preventive nature of the bill, even though he conceded that enforcement might be problematic. He acknowledged, however, that the ACHC had not been able to mobilize government support for the bill, noting that Minister of Hindu Affairs Douglas Devananda has not heeded ACHC's call for support of the legislation.

Muslims Not Active Against Legislation

18. (SBU) CPA's Edrisinha asserted that members of the Muslim community are "very concerned" about the anti-conversion legislation, but do not readily take a public stand on this controversial issue. Conversations with Muslim leaders, however, yielded no evidence of strong concern about the legislation. Alavi Mowlana, Governor of the Western Province and a prominent Muslim activist, commented that although Muslims oppose unethical conversions, the community is not taking a position on the proposed legislation. Other Muslim interlocutors indicated they are also opposed to unethical conversions in principle, but appear indifferent to the JHU legislation.

The Official Line

19. (C) In an October 8 meeting with Chitranganie Wagiswara, Additional Secretary for SAARC at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Morales noted that she was concerned about the increase in violence against Christian groups and about proposed anti-conversion legislation in Sri Lanka. Wagiswara emphasized that Sri Lanka is a tolerant society, and that attacks against Christians are carried out by only a very small number of people. The JHU bill was a private member's bill, she noted, adding that each group is free to express its views in a democracy. When asked about the (more restrictive) Government-sponsored bill, she reported that it is currently with the Attorney General's (AG) office, where it is being reviewed for constitutional conflicts. After consultation with the Legal Draftsperson, the AG will forward the bill to the Cabinet. If the Cabinet is satisfied, then the bill will go to Parliament.

Comment

10. (C) While MFA interlocutors downplayed the potential

risks to Sri Lanka's reputation for religious tolerance, representatives from Christian organizations do not see such a sunny picture. Christian leaders have repeatedly told us that they also oppose "unethical" conversions. The obvious problem, of course, is determining what constitutes an "unethical" conversion. Inter-religious councils could play an important role in minimizing the resentment that purported "unethical" conversions have caused among Buddhists and Hindus; however, convincing independent-minded evangelical churches to enter such discussions might be difficult. Many evangelical churches are not affiliated with other churches or umbrella Christian groups and might not participate in inter-religious councils even if they were invited. How either JHU or GSL legislation would fare in Parliament may depend on whether or not the major parties decide to use anti-conversion legislation as an opportunity to appeal for much-needed support from a largely Buddhist majority disgruntled by the ever-increasing cost of living. While many Tamil Hindus may support the anti-conversion legislation, it is unlikely that Tamil Hindu parliamentarians, the majority of whom are pro-LTTE Tamil National Alliance MPs, or Minister of Hindu Affairs Douglas Devananda will support legislation which smacks of Buddhist chauvinism (and could alienate the 30 percent of Tamils who are Christian). END COMMENT.

11. (U) Joanela Morales did not have an opportunity to clear this cable.
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